

A Mystery of Heroism by Stephen Crane

BEFORE YOU READ

LITERARY FOCUS: SITUATIONAL IRONY

Situational irony is the difference between what you expect will happen and what actually happens. Suppose, for example, a person plans carefully for a worldwide disaster by stocking an underground room with provisions. As it turns out, a disaster does occur, and the man is pleased with himself and his foresight. As he goes to prepare his first meal in the shelter, he realizes that he forgot to stock a can opener. The hundreds of cans of food he stockpiled are useless to him.

READING SKILLS: IDENTIFYING THEME

When you finish a story you often ask: "What was the meaning of that story?" When you ask that question, you are asking about theme. **Theme** is the insight or truth about human experience revealed in a story. We learn about this truth as we share the events of the story and the discoveries the story characters make. When you are looking for theme, ask: "What have these actions revealed to me about our lives? What have the events of the story revealed to the main character? What has he or she learned?"

To help you think about theme, fill out this chart after your first reading of the story:

Main events in story	
What character(s) discover	
Significance of title	
Key details	

REVIEW SKILLS

As you read "A Mystery of Heroism," look for ambiguities in the story.

AMBIGUITY

A technique by which a writer deliberately suggests two or more different, and sometimes conflicting, meanings in a work.



Reading Standard 3.3

Analyze the ways in which irony, tone, mood, the author's style, and the "sound" of language achieve specific rhetorical or aesthetic purposes or both.

Reading Standard 3.8

Analyze the clarity and consistency of political assumptions in a selection of literary works or essays on a topic. (Political approach)

Reading Standard 3.8 (Grade 9–10 Review)

Interpret and evaluate the impact of ambiguities, subtleties, contradictions, ironies, and incongruities in a text.



A Mystery of Heroism

Stephen Crane

Notes

WORD STUDY

The word *duck* in line 10 refers to heavy cotton cloth. This use of *duck* comes from the Dutch word for cloth (*doek*).

The dark uniforms of the men were so coated with dust from the incessant wrestling of the two armies that the regiment almost seemed a part of the clay bank which shielded them from the shells. On the top of the hill a battery¹ was arguing in tremendous roars with some other guns, and to the eye of the infantry, the artillerymen, the guns, the caissons,² the horses, were distinctly outlined upon the blue sky. When a piece was fired, a red streak as round as a log flashed low in the heavens, like a monstrous bolt of lightning. The men of the battery wore white duck trousers, which somehow emphasized their legs, and when they ran and crowded in little groups at the bidding of the

1. **battery** *n.*: set of heavy guns.

2. **caissons** (*kā'sənz*) *n. pl.*: ammunition wagons.

shouting officers, it was more impressive than usual to the infantry.

Fred Collins of A Company was saying: "Thunder, I wisht I had a drink. Ain't there any water round here?" Then somebody yelled: "There goes th' bugler!"

As the eyes of half of the regiment swept in one machine-like movement, there was an instant's picture of a horse in a great convulsive leap of a death wound and a rider leaning back with a crooked arm and spread fingers before his face. On the ground was the crimson terror of an exploding shell, with fibers of flame that seemed like lances. A glittering bugle swung clear of the rider's back as fell headlong the horse and the man. In the air was an odor as from a **conflagration**.

Sometimes they of the infantry looked down at a fair little meadow which spread at their feet. Its long, green grass was rippling gently in a breeze. Beyond it was the gray form of a house half torn to pieces by shells and by the busy axes of soldiers who had pursued firewood. The line of an old fence was now dimly marked by long weeds and by an occasional post. A shell had blown the well house to fragments. Little lines of gray smoke ribboning upward from some embers indicated the place where had stood the barn.

From beyond a curtain of green woods there came the sound of some stupendous scuffle as if two animals of the size of islands were fighting. At a distance there were occasional appearances of swift-moving men, horses, batteries, flags, and, with the crashing of infantry, volleys were heard, often, wild and frenzied cheers. In the midst of it all, Smith and Ferguson, two privates of A Company, were engaged in a heated discussion, which involved the greatest questions of the national existence.

The battery on the hill presently engaged in a frightful duel. The white legs of the gunners scampered this way and that way and the officers redoubled their shouts. The guns, with their

CLARIFY

Re-read lines 17–24. What has happened to the bugler?

VOCABULARY

conflagration
(kän'flə·grā'shən) *n.*: huge fire.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

Re-read lines 25–41. How does the narrator describe the natural setting? How does he describe the battle raging within the setting?

WORD STUDY

Lines 34–36 contain a **metaphor** and a **simile**. Underline the metaphor (a comparison that does not use the words *like* or *as*), and circle the simile (a comparison that uses the words *like* or *as*).

VOCABULARY

stolidity (stə·lid'ə·tē) *n.*:
absence of emotional
reactions.

CLARIFY

Re-read lines 58–65.
What has happened to
the lieutenant?

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 76. Why would
it be difficult for Collins to
get a drink of water from
the old well?

COMPARE & CONTRAST

Underline the words in lines
69–76 that describe the
meadow before the battle.
Then, circle the words that
describe the meadow during
the battle.

demeanors of **stolidity** and courage, were typical of something infinitely self-possessed in this clamor of death that swirled around the hill.

One of a “swing” team was suddenly smitten quivering to the ground and his maddened brethren dragged his torn body in
50 their struggle to escape from this turmoil and danger. A young soldier astride one of the leaders swore and fumed in his saddle and furiously jerked at the bridle. An officer screamed out an order so violently that his voice broke and ended the sentence in a falsetto³ shriek.

The leading company of the infantry regiment was somewhat exposed and the colonel ordered it moved more fully under the shelter of the hill. There was the clank of steel against steel.

A lieutenant of the battery rode down and passed them, holding his right arm carefully in his left hand. And it was as if
60 this arm was not at all a part of him, but belonged to another man. His sober and reflective charger⁴ went slowly. The officer’s face was grimy and perspiring and his uniform was tousled as if he had been in direct grapple with an enemy. He smiled grimly when the men stared at him. He turned his horse toward the meadow.

Collins of A Company said: “I wisht I had a drink. I bet there’s water in that there ol’ well yonder!”

“Yes; but how you goin’ to git it?”

For the little meadow which intervened was now suffering a
70 terrible onslaught of shells. Its green and beautiful calm had vanished utterly. Brown earth was being flung in monstrous handfuls. And there was a massacre of the young blades of grass. They were being torn, burned, obliterated. Some curious fortune of the battle had made this gentle little meadow the object of the red hate of the shells and each one as it exploded seemed like an imprecation⁵ in the face of a maiden.

3. **falsetto** *n.* used as *adj.*: artificially high voice.

4. **charger** *n.*: horse trained for battle.

5. **imprecation** *n.*: curse.

The wounded officer who was riding across this expanse said to himself: “Why, they couldn’t shoot any harder if the whole army was massed here!”

80 A shell struck the gray ruins of the house and as, after the roar, the shattered wall fell in fragments, there was a noise which resembled the flapping of shutters during a wild gale of winter. Indeed the infantry paused in the shelter of the bank, appeared as men standing upon a shore contemplating a madness of the sea. The angel of calamity⁶ had under its glance the battery upon the hill. Fewer white-legged men labored about the guns. A shell had smitten one of the pieces, and after the flare, the smoke, the dust, the wrath of this blow was gone, it was possible to see white legs stretched horizontally upon the ground. And at
90 that interval to the rear, where it is the business of battery horses to stand with their noses to the fight awaiting the command to drag their guns out of the destruction or into it or wheresoever these incomprehensible humans demanded with whip and spur—in this line of passive and dumb spectators, whose fluttering hearts yet would not let them forget the iron laws of man’s control of them—in this rank of brute soldiers there had been relentless and hideous carnage. From the ruck⁷ of bleeding and prostrate⁸ horses, the men of the infantry could see one animal raising its stricken body with its forelegs and turning its nose
100 with mystic and profound eloquence toward the sky.

Some comrades joked Collins about his thirst. “Well, if yeh want a drink so bad, why don’t yeh go git it?”

“Well, I will in a minnet if yeh don’t shut up.”

A lieutenant of artillery floundered his horse straight down the hill with as great concern as if it were level ground. As he galloped past the colonel of the infantry, he threw up his hand in swift salute. “We’ve got to get out of that,” he roared angrily. He was a black-bearded officer, and his eyes, which resembled

PARAPHRASE

The narrator uses vivid, eloquent language to describe the events of the battle. What has happened in lines 80–85? Restate the events in your own words.

AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

Re-read lines 89–100. Which is more understandable: the humans’ behavior or the animals’ behavior? What might the purpose of this passage be?

6. **calamity** *n.*: disaster; misfortune.

7. **ruck** *n.*: mass; crowd.

8. **prostrate** *adj.*: lying flat on the ground.

Pause at line 115. Where is the black-bearded officer going, and why?

Re-read lines 121–128.
Underline the information
that tells what happened to
the lieutenant who was
injured earlier in the story.

ominous (äm'ə·nəs) *adj.*: threatening; menacing.

The fat major standing carelessly with his sword held horizontally behind him and with his legs far apart, looked after the receding horseman and laughed. "He wants to get back with orders pretty quick or there'll be no batt'ry left," he observed.

The wise young captain of the second company hazarded⁹ to the lieutenant colonel that the enemy's infantry would probably soon attack the hill, and the lieutenant colonel snubbed him.

There was a quarrel in A Company. Collins was shaking his
130 fist in the faces of some laughing comrades. "Dern yeh! I ain't
afraid t' go. If yeh say much, I will go!"

“Of course, yeh will! Yeh’ll run through that there medder, won’t yeh?”

Collins said, in a terrible voice: "You see, now!" At this **ominous** threat his comrades broke into renewed jeers.

Collins gave them a dark scowl and went to find his captain. The latter was conversing with the colonel of the regiment.

“Captain,” said Collins, saluting and standing at attention. In those days all trousers bagged at the knees. “Captain, I want
140 t’ git permission to go git some water from that there well over
yonder!”

9. **hazarded** v.: risked saying.

**IDENTIFY
CAUSE & EFFECT**

Why does Collins ask to get some water from the well across the meadow (lines 142–155)?

[illegible]

VOCABULARY

gesticulating
(jes·tik'yōō·lāt'in) *v.* used as
adj.: gesturing, especially
with the hands and arms.

They were very busy in preparing him for his ordeal. When they inspected him carefully, it was somewhat like the examination that grooms give a horse before a race; and they were

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Notes

CLARIFY

What is the “long animal-like thing” (line 184)?



The Hornet's Nest (1895) by Thomas Corwin Lindsay.

Oil on canvas.

Courtesy Cincinnati Historical Society.

amazed, staggered by the whole affair. Their astonishment found vent in strange repetitions.

“Are yeh sure a-goin’?” they demanded again and again.

“Certainly I am,” cried Collins, at last furiously.

180 He strode sullenly¹¹ away from them. He was swinging five or six canteens by their cords. It seemed that his cap would not remain firmly on his head, and often he reached and pulled it down over his brow.

There was a general movement in the compact column. The long animal-like thing moved slightly. Its four hundred eyes were turned upon the figure of Collins.

“Well, sir, if that ain’t th’ derndest thing. I never thought Fred Collins had the blood in him for that kind of business.”

“What’s he goin’ to do, anyhow?”

11. **sullenly** *adv.*: in a resentful manner; sulkily.

ANALYZE

Re-read lines 216–231. Does Collins think of himself as a hero? Circle the two phrases that make the answer to this question **ambiguous**, or open to interpretation. (*Grade 9–10 Review*)

INTERPRET

Why does Collins think that he is “an intruder in the land of fine deeds” (line 233)?

IDENTIFY CAUSE & EFFECT

Pause at line 250. What happens to snap Collins out of his daze?

No, it could not be true. He was not a hero. Heroes had no shames in their lives and, as for him, he remembered borrowing fifteen dollars from a friend and promising to pay it back the next day, and then avoiding that friend for ten months. When at home his mother had aroused him for the early labor of his life on the farm, it had often been his fashion to be irritable, childish, diabolical, and his mother had died since he had come to the war.

He saw that in this matter of the well, the canteens, the shells, he was an intruder in the land of fine deeds.

He was now about thirty paces from his comrades. The regiment had just turned its many faces toward him.

From the forest of terrific noises there suddenly emerged a little uneven line of men. They fired fiercely and rapidly at distant foliage on which appeared little puffs of white smoke. The spatter of skirmish firing was added to the thunder of the guns on the hill. The little line of men ran forward. A color sergeant fell flat with his flag as if he had slipped on ice. There was hoarse cheering from this distant field.

Collins suddenly felt that two demon fingers were pressed into his ears. He could see nothing but flying arrows, flaming red. He lurched from the shock of this explosion, but he made a mad rush for the house, which he viewed as a man submerged to the neck in a boiling surf might view the shore. In the air, little pieces of shell howled and the earthquake explosions drove him insane with the menace of their roar. As he ran, the canteens knocked together with a rhythmical tinkling.

As he neared the house, each detail of the scene became vivid to him. He was aware of some bricks of the vanished chimney lying on the sod. There was a door which hung by one hinge.

Rifle bullets called forth by the insistent skirmishers came from the far-off bank of foliage. They mingled with the shells and the pieces of shells until the air was torn in all directions by hootings, yells, howls. The sky was full of fiends who directed all their wild rage at his head.

When he came to the well, he flung himself face downward and peered into its darkness. There were furtive silver glintings some feet from the surface. He grabbed one of the canteens and, unfastening its cap, swung it down by the cord. The water flowed slowly in with an **indolent** gurgle.

And now as he lay with his face turned away, he was suddenly smitten with the terror. It came upon his heart like the grasp of claws. All the power faded from his muscles. For an instant he was no more than a dead man.

270 The canteen filled with a maddening slowness in the manner of all bottles. Presently he recovered his strength and addressed a screaming oath to it. He leaned over until it seemed as if he intended to try to push water into it with his hands. His eyes as he gazed down into the well shone like two pieces of metal and in their expression was a great appeal and a great curse. The stupid water derided¹² him.

There was the blaring thunder of a shell. Crimson light shone through the swift-boiling smoke and made a pink reflection on part of the wall of the well. Collins jerked out his arm and canteen with the same motion that a man would use in withdrawing his head from a furnace.

280

He scrambled erect and glared and hesitated. On the ground near him lay the old well bucket, with a length of rusty chain. He lowered it swiftly into the well. The bucket struck the water and then turning lazily over, sank. When, with hand reaching tremblingly over head, he hauled it out, it knocked often against the walls of the well and spilled some of its contents.

In running with a filled bucket, a man can adopt but one kind of gait. So through this terrible field over which screamed practical angels of death Collins ran in the manner of a farmer chased out of a dairy by a bull.

290

His face went staring white with anticipation—anticipation of a blow that would whirl him around and down. He would fall as he had seen other men fall, the life knocked out of them so

VOCABULARY

indolent (in'də·lənt) *adj.*: lazy.

CLARIFY

Re-read lines 265–268. What new feeling overtakes Collins as he tries to fill his first canteen?

IDENTIFY CAUSE & EFFECT

Pause at line 286. Why does Collins fill a bucket with water instead of the canteens?

CLARIFY

What are the “practical angels of death” (line 289)?

12. **derided** *v.*: mocked.

Notes

VOCABULARY

blanched (blandht) *v.* used as *adj.*: drained of color.

CLARIFY

Re-read lines 308–321. Whom does Collins encounter while he is running across the meadow? What does this person want?

300 suddenly that their knees were no more quick to touch the ground than their heads. He saw the long blue line of the regiment, but his comrades were standing looking at him from the edge of an impossible star. He was aware of some deep wheel ruts and hoof prints in the sod beneath his feet.

310 The artillery officer who had fallen in this meadow had been making groans in the teeth of the tempest of sound. These futile cries, wrenched from him by his agony, were heard only by shells, bullets. When wild-eyed Collins came running, this officer raised himself. His face contorted and **blanched** from pain, he was about to utter some great beseeching cry. But suddenly his face straightened and he called: “Say, young man, give me a drink of water, will you?”

Collins had no room amid his emotions for surprise. He was mad from the threats of destruction.

“I can’t,” he screamed, and in this reply was a full description of his quaking apprehension. His cap was gone and his hair was riotous. His clothes made it appear that he had been dragged over the ground by the heels. He ran on.



Charge of VMI Cadets at New Market (1914) by Benjamin West Clinedinst. Oil on canvas (18" × 23").

Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia.

The officer's head sank down and one elbow crooked. His foot in its brass-bound stirrup still stretched over the body of his horse and the other leg was under the steed.

330

But Collins turned. He came dashing back. His face had now turned gray and in his eyes was all terror. "Here it is! Here it is!"

The officer was as a man gone in drink. His arm bended like a twig. His head drooped as if his neck was of willow. He was sinking to the ground, to lie face downward.

Collins grabbed him by the shoulder. "Here it is. Here's your drink. Turn over! Turn over, man, for God's sake!"

With Collins hauling at his shoulder, the officer twisted his body and fell with his face turned toward that region where lived the unspeakable noises of the swirling missiles. There was the faintest shadow of a smile on his lips as he looked at Collins. He gave a sigh, a little primitive breath like that from a child.

340

Collins tried to hold the bucket steadily, but his shaking hands caused the water to splash all over the face of the dying man. Then he jerked it away and ran on.

The regiment gave him a welcoming roar. The grimed faces were wrinkled in laughter.

His captain waved the bucket away. "Give it to the men!"

The two genial,¹³ skylarking¹⁴ young lieutenants were the first to gain possession of it. They played over it in their fashion.

350

When one tried to drink, the other teasingly knocked his elbow. "Don't, Billie! You'll make me spill it," said the one. The other laughed.

Suddenly there was an oath, the thud of wood on the ground, and a swift murmur of astonishment from the ranks. The two lieutenants glared at each other. The bucket lay on the ground empty.

INFER

Why does Collins turn and go back to the officer (lines 331–332)?

ANALYZE

Pause at line 345. Circle the word that tells what will happen to the officer after Collins leaves. How does the officer's fate make Collins's act of heroism **ironic**?

INTERPRET

Re-read lines 354–357. The ending of the story is **ambiguous**; it is open to more than one interpretation. In your own words, explain what you think has happened.

13. **genial** *adj.*: friendly; cheerful.

14. **skylarking** *v.* used as *adj.*: frolicking; playful.

A Mystery of Heroism

Reading Skills: Identifying Theme Fill in the chart below with details from the story that illustrate the elements in the left-hand column. Then, review your chart entries and state the story's theme at the bottom of the chart.

Main events in story	
What character(s) discover	
Significance of title	
Key details	
Statement of Theme	

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VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

DIRECTIONS: Write words from the Word Box in the blanks to complete the paragraph below. Not all words will be used.

Word Box

conflagration
stolidity
ominous
gesticulating
provisional
retraction
indolent
blanched

Nate Forrester of B Company felt almost sleepy. The steady noise had been ringing in his ears for so many hours that the blasts no longer sounded (1) _____ or even frightened him. His company was staying behind a (2) _____ wall they had just built. Lying on his back, he watched the flames from the (3) _____. From a distance the relaxed soldier could be mistaken for an (4) _____ young boy. But the noise suddenly stopped. Forrester snapped out of his daze. His face (5) _____ with fear, he wondered what new horrors the silence would bring.

ETYMOLOGY

A word's **etymology** is its history. Dictionaries usually provide an etymology after a word's pronunciation or following its definitions.

DIRECTIONS: A list of word etymologies is given at the right, in column B. Match each etymology with the appropriate "military" word in column A, on the left. On the lines at the bottom, list any words you can think of that might share these roots. The root words are in *italics* in column B.

A

- ___ 1. infantry
- ___ 2. regiment
- ___ 3. cavalry
- ___ 4. artillery

B

- a. from the Old French *atillier*, meaning "to equip"
- b. from the Latin *caballus*, meaning "horse"
- c. from the Latin *infans*, meaning "child"
- d. from the Latin *regere*, meaning "to rule"



Reading Standard 1.1
Trace the etymology of significant terms used in political science and history.



Check your Standards Mastery at the back of this book.

Irony

Irony is a discrepancy between appearances and reality. There are three main types of irony: verbal irony, situational irony, and dramatic irony.

DIRECTIONS: Complete the chart with examples from the selection that illustrate each of the three types of irony. (Not all selections will include all three types of irony.)

Type of Irony	Example from Selection
Verbal Irony: a contrast between what is said and what is meant—for example, calling a bald man “Curly.”	
Situational Irony: a contrast between what you expect to happen and what actually happens—for example, when the birthday girl cries at her party.	
Dramatic Irony: a contrast between what the characters know and what the reader or audience knows—for example, when the reader knows a character will die at the end of the story but the character does not know.	